

Pros and cons of an illicit drug users' registration system by means of judicial data in Flanders (Belgium)

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The main objective of this study was to evaluate the advantages and shortcomings of a new kind of registration of illicit drug users in Flanders, Belgium.

Data about the profile of drug users who have come into contact with the law were collected by examining the records kept by the District Courts. On the one hand, published data on illicit drug users in Flanders are scarce. On the other hand, a lot of unused judicial information is available. All District Courts in Flanders ($n = 13$) and Brussels ($n = 1$) participated in the study.

The data show that a simple registration of verbalised drug users with a short questionnaire can provide useful information for prevention campaigns and police investigation and shows the importance of prevention programmes starting at school. Notwithstanding some shortcomings, the illicit drug users' registration system by means of judicial data in Flanders forms a solid basis upon which an *integrated registration* of illicit drug use can be built. *Public Health* (2001) 115, 70–77.

Keywords: illicit drug users; registration; judicial data; Flanders

Introduction

Data on illicit drug users in Flanders are scarce. The available material is mainly obtained through information from welfare organisations, specialised in the treatment of addicted persons, or by surveys in small groups, mostly in schools.^{1,2} Each of these data deals with a very small and specific part of the problem and the registrations are almost always once-only activities. In 1990, a study in Flemish District Courts was initiated by the University of Antwerp in co-operation with the Antwerp District Court. The initiative was taken by the Antwerp City Drugs Platform, a municipal organisation which evaluates the problem of drug use in its region and which co-ordinates drug prevention and care. This kind of data was never used before in Flanders. In Belgium, there are 27 District Courts, evenly spread throughout the country: 13 in Wallonia, 13 in Flanders and 1 in Brussels. Although the study started in only one District Court, throughout the years (1991–1997), all 13 Flemish District Courts and the District Court of Brussels participated.^{3–5} A map with the sites of the District Courts involved is presented in Figure 1.

The main objective of this study was to evaluate the advantages and shortcomings of this new kind of registration of illicit drug users. To this end, data about the profile of drug users who have come into contact with the law in Flanders (Belgium) were collected by examining the records kept by the District Courts. It must be stressed that most of these drug users only got a *procès-verbal* and were not imprisoned. When someone has illicit drugs on him/her, he/she is punishable in accordance with the Belgian Drug Law. The police have to make up a *procès-verbal* for every criminal act. The *procès-verbal* describes what the police have detected but the accused also has to make a statement. In practice, the drugs will be seized and tested. Usually, a body search and a domiciliary visit will take place. The *procès-verbal* is transferred to the District Court, which decides whether the case is dropped or the accused will be prosecuted. From that moment on, the person involved is known to the police and the District Court for violating the Drug Law. In the case of recidivism, the chance of a prosecution is higher. For minors, a slightly different procedure is operative. Blood testing for drugs can only be enforced by law within the scope of drinking and driving.

The important research questions of our study are: what is the profile (sex, age, place of residence) of those who come into contact with the Belgian law because of their drug use? How many of them had previous contacts with the law? Which substances do they use? What about multiple drug use? What is the relationship of age, sex

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and place of residence of the drug users with the substances they use, multiple drug use, or their previous contact with the law? The added value of this project was to get an adequate picture of any trends throughout the years studied. Ultimately, the generated data should serve in planning a well-founded prevention campaign.

Methods

The study involved an analysis of records kept by the District Courts. A brief questionnaire was used to extract data from the charges of all drug users who came into contact with the law in one of the participating legal districts during the registration period. This questionnaire was filled in by a District Court civil servant based on the information from the charges. The questionnaire included the following items: age, sex, residence, previous drug-related contact with the law and substances used. To be sure that the questionnaires were filled in correctly, an instruction leaflet accompanied the blank forms. In order to remove duplicate registrations, the drug users were registered by encoded name. From 1996 on, some additional items were registered: the police instance responsible for the booking and the nationality of the drug user (as is mentioned on their identity card).

Starting in 1990, the Antwerp District Court filled in the questionnaire for all drug users who came into contact with the law in Antwerp from 10 September 1990 to 10

December 1990. During the following years, this registration was repeated (each year from 10 September to 10 December) and extended to all 13 Flemish District Courts and the District Court of Brussels. If it seemed suitable, the results were presented across the different registration periods. If not, they are restricted to the most recent registration periods (1996/1997).

All data were analysed annually by the Research Group, Epidemiology and Community Medicine, University of Antwerp. Duplicate registrations were removed, based on a combination of encoded name, birth date, sex and residence. Also the forms of non-users and dealers were removed.

The data were processed using the statistical computer programme CSS (Complete Statistical System, Statsoft Inc.©, 1991). Where appropriate, χ^2 was used to compare the different groups. *P*-values less than 0.05 were considered statistically significant.

Results

Participation

Table 1 shows the number of registrations for the different District Courts from 1990 to 1997.

In 1990, Antwerp was the only participating district in the project and the registration was limited to adult drug users (≥ 18 y old). During the following years, the juvenile

The district courts in Flanders + Brussels



Figure 1 Map of the District Courts in Flanders and Brussels.

Table 1 Number of returned questionnaires per District Court from 1990 to 1997

District Court	Number of returned questionnaires							
	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
Antwerp	406*	468	423	548	491	893	777	958
Bruges					54	71	119	223
Brussels		893	740*	912	579	865	288	1312
Dendermonde			26*	85	160	307	361	505
Ghent		226	132	192	192	338		
Hasselt			144	181	170	219	246	313
Ypres		8	12	30	18	19	25	33
Kortrijk					77	69	81	144
Leuven			105	129	74	144	107	74
Mechelen		126	83	123	132	118	166	221
Oudenaarde				32	50	47	121	95
Tongeren					191	204°	233	185
Turnhout		69	190	131	238	129	226	445
Veurne					11	33	35	42
Total number of returned questionnaires	406	1790	1855	2363	2437	3456	2785	4550
Total number of participating District Courts	1	6	9	10	14	14	13	13

*: only adult verbalised drug users were registered, °: without check for double-count, forms only returned in October 1999.

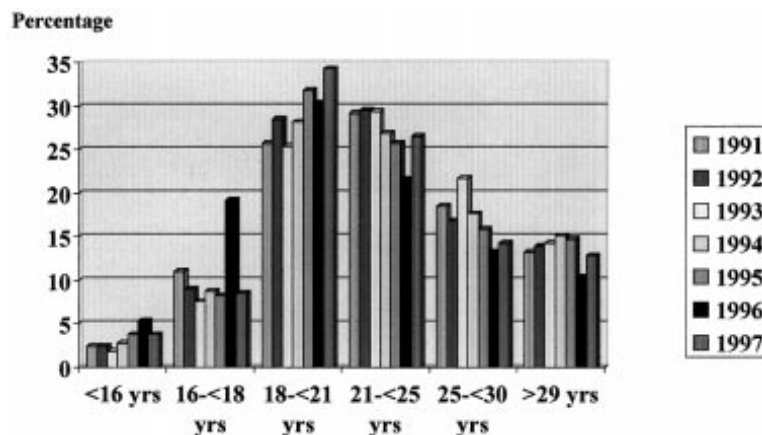


Figure 2 Relative distribution of the age categories of the drug users booked in Flanders/Brussels from 1991 to 1997.

court was also involved in the survey and there was a gradual increase in the number of participating District Courts, with a maximal participation of 14 in 1994 and 1995. The amount of registrations increased yearly from 406 in 1990 to 4550 in 1997, despite the absence of the District Court of Ghent, due to a shortage of staff. Only in 1996 was there a drop in the number of returned questionnaires ($n = 2785$). In particular, for Brussels, the number of returned forms diminished considerably from 865 in 1995 to 285 in 1996. From 1996 on, the Brussels data were delivered electronically, so that registration was no longer dependent on the goodwill of the civil servants concerned to fill in the forms and the registration could be considered fully complete. This resulted in a record number of drug users registered in 1997. In 1997, the major part of the verbalisations was carried out by the State Police

(65.8%), followed by the Community Police (28.0%) and other Police Departments (4.3%), including railway police and customs officers. In 1.5% of registrations, the verbalising department was not known, mostly because it concerned transfers between District Courts.

Population characteristics

The average age of the verbalised persons varied from 21.8 y in 1996 to 23.7 y in 1993. When spread of age and specific age categories were considered, there is an evolution in the distribution (Figure 2) ($P < 0.001$). The median proportion of each age category throughout the registration years 1991–1997 is as follows: < 16 y: 2.7%; 16–17 y: 8.7%; 18–20 y: 28.5%; 21–24 y: 26.9%; 25–29 y: 16.8%

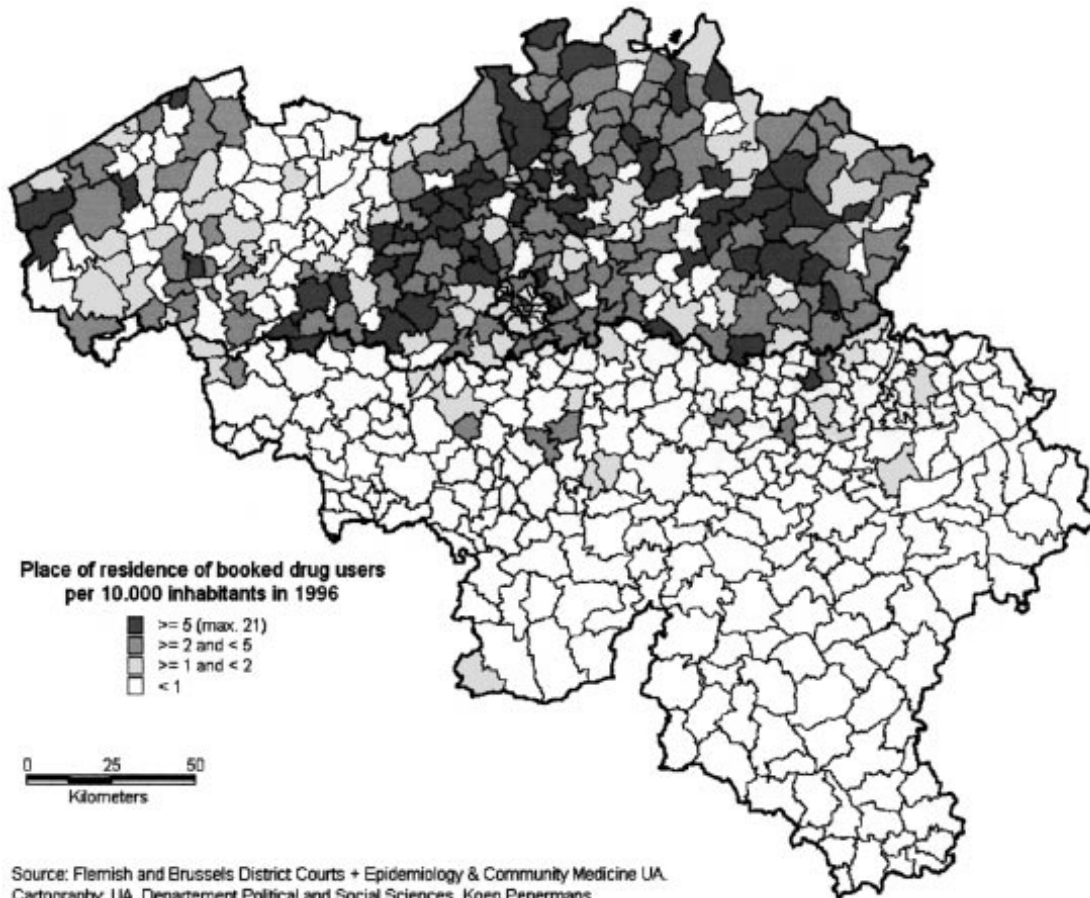


Figure 3 Map of Belgium, showing the geographic distribution of the place of residence of the drug users booked in Flanders/Brussels in 1996.

Table 2 Use of different illicit drugs for 1997

Drug	Number of users	Percentage of users*
Cannabis	3522	77.4
Amphetamines	555	12.7
Cocaine	332	7.3
XTC (ecstasy)	304	6.9
Heroin	264	5.8
LSD and other hallucinogens	50	1.1
Methadone	25	0.7
Medication	23	0.5
Other opiates	14	0.4
Sniffed drugs	5	0.1
Unknown	12	0.4

*The use of one product does not exclude the use of another.

and > 29 y: 13.9%. Although the contribution of youths younger than 16 y was rather limited, there was a gradual rise over time from 2.4% in 1991 to 5.3% in 1996. In 1997, the percentage dropped again to 3.7%. In the age group

from 16 to 17 y, there was a small decline from 10.9% in 1991 to 8.3% in 1995, but a doubling of the number in 1996. In 1997, the percentage of verbalised drug users aged 16–17 y was 8.5. Throughout the period from 1991 to 1997, over 50% of registered drug users can be found in the age category from 18 to 24 y. The proportion of verbalised men versus verbalised women during that period did not change significantly, the percentage of women varying between 10.3 (1992) and 12.9 (1994). Making allowances for age, women were relatively more represented in the age groups less than 18 years old ($P < 0.0001$, $\chi^2 = 43.42$; data for 1996 but in line with the other registration years).

The nationality of the booked drug users was only registered from 1996 on. Around 75% of the verbalised drug users were of Belgian nationality in 1996 and 1997, while the majority of the non-Belgians came from other countries of the European Union.

The District Court where the drug user was registered is dependent on the place where he was verbalised and is not by definition the place of residence of that drug user. The registration of the place of residence could provide us with a picture of the geographical distribution of the illicit drugs

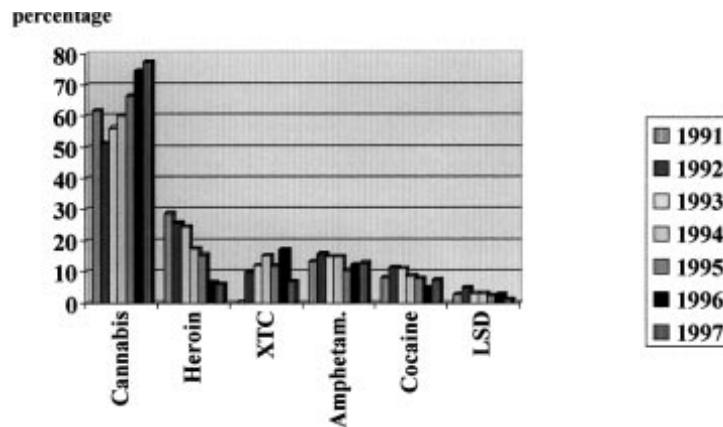


Figure 4 Relative distribution of the most important illicit products registered in drug users booked in Flanders/Brussels from 1991 to 1997.

Table 3 Relationship between age and products used (data from 1996)

Drug	Age categories (y)						χ^2	P
	< 16 n = 147	16–17 n = 536	18–20 n = 842	21–24 n = 593	25–29 n = 362	> 29 n = 279		
Cannabis	87.9	80.6	76.0	73.1	69.9	60.5	56.14	< 0.001
Heroin	0.0	1.4	2.1	8.3	14.2	17.0	145.30	< 0.001
XTC (ecstasy)	9.3	21.6	20.1	17.4	12.7	9.2	34.82	< 0.001
Amphetamines	4.3	8.3	14.1	14.8	13.0	13.3	21.49	< 0.01
Cocaine	1.4	1.6	2.5	4.9	9.0	13.3	80.45	< 0.001
LSD	3.6	5.6	2.1	2.5	1.2	0.7	24.55	< 0.001

The data are expressed as percentages per age category using a certain drug. The χ^2 on each row refers to the association between the use of the specific drug on that row and age category.

problem. Throughout the years, 12–17% of the verbalised drug users were resident outside Belgium. For those having a residence in Belgium, Figure 3 shows the geographical distribution of these residences (data for 1996).

Of all registered drug users in 1997, at least 33.9% had had one or more previous contacts with the law due to drug use. The highest percentage of previous contacts was registered in 1992 (37.8%), the lowest in 1996 (27.9%).

Drug characteristics

The relative importance of the different illicit drugs is shown in Table 2 for the 1997 registration. Cannabis, used by more than three-quarters of the booked drug users, is definitely the most important product, followed by amphetamines. Cocaine, XTC (ecstasy) and heroin are less popular but show a peak in some registration years. LSD is not frequently registered but had a little, once-only rise in 1992. Methadone, non-prescribed medication, other opiates and sniffed products are rarely registered. The median proportion of the six most registered drugs through-

out the registration years 1991–1997 is as follows: cannabis: 61.8%; heroin: 17.4%; XTC: 11.9%; amphetamines: 13.3%; cocaine: 8.0% and LSD: 2.7%.

An analysis of the relative importance of the different products over the years showed that there was a remarkable yearly decline in the use of heroin and, to a lesser extent, of cocaine (see Figure 4). On the other hand, the relative importance of cannabis increased significantly from 48.5% in 1990 to 77.4% in 1997. Although the contribution of amphetamines increased from 1990 (10.8%) to 1992 (15.6%), its importance diminished slightly in the last few years. XTC was not separately registered until 1992 but there was a remarkable increase in substance use from 1992 (9.8%) to 1996 (17.1%). The use of hallucinogens like LSD appeared to be rather constant and small (< 3%). Substances like sniffed drugs, methadone and non-prescribed medication were only sporadically used by the verbalised drug users.

Table 3 (data from 1996, but in line with the other registration years) shows the products used by age category. For all drugs shown there was a statistically significant difference in use according to age categories.

Although cannabis was relatively more used at a young age, it still was the most important drug in the eldest group ($P < 0.0001$, $\chi^2 = 56.14$). Cocaine ($P < 0.0001$, $\chi^2 = 80.45$) and heroin ($P < 0.0001$, $\chi^2 = 45.30$), on the other hand, were relatively more used by the elder drug users. Amphetamines ($P = 0.001$, $\chi^2 = 21.49$) were less popular in the lower age group, while XTC ($P < 0.0001$, $\chi^2 = 34.82$) was more important in the group 16 to 24 y.

In 1997, 14% of the booked drug users admitted to using more than 1 product. Most of them combined cannabis with another illicit product. The most popular combinations are: cannabis with XTC, XTC with amphetamines, and cannabis with amphetamines. The proportion of drug users using 3 products or more varied between 2–6% over the years. Polydrug use was present in all age categories, even in the youngest group: in 1996 8.8% of the booked minors (< 18 y) admitted to using 2 illicit products, while 4.8% used 3 drugs or more.

For 1996 there was a statistically significant difference between men and women for the use of cannabis ($P = 0.001$, $\chi^2 = 12.03$) and amphetamines ($P = 0.007$, $\chi^2 = 7.406$). Cannabis was relatively more used by male, while amphetamines were relatively more used by female drug users. These results are in line with those from 1997 but are not completely comparable with those of 1995. In that registration year, cannabis was also more used by men ($P < 0.001$, $\chi^2 = 32.10$), while cocaine ($P < 0.001$, $\chi^2 = 24.47$), heroin ($P = 0.021$, $\chi^2 = 5.21$) and methadone ($P < 0.02$, $\chi^2 = 8.62$) were relatively more popular among female drug users. For amphetamines, in 1995 there was no statistically significant difference between male and female booked drug users ($P = 0.234$, $\chi^2 = 1.42$).

Discussion

The registration of illicit drug users by means of judicial data certainly yields interesting results. These will be discussed first. Afterwards, the pros and cons of this kind of registration, which is unique to Belgium, will be debated.

Discussion of results

The population of verbalised drug users consisted particularly of men (between 86.7–89.7%, according to the registration year). This result was consistent with other prevalence studies in Belgium, even though the male to female ratio was never as high as in our study. Questionnaires in Flemish schools revealed that 7.2% of the boys tried drugs at least once whilst this was only 2.5% for the girls.² It could be that the proportion of women in the current study was underestimated because female drug users may be less suspected by the police or less easily caught because of a higher tolerance towards women. Our

study also showed that the proportion of men to women in the different age groups varied: there were relatively more female drug users in the younger age group (< 18 y) than in the older one (> 24 y). This suggests that women are relatively more likely to try illicit drugs at a younger age.

It is alarming that the youngest verbalised drug users were only 12 and that the proportion of the age category younger than 16 increased to 5.3% in 1996. Although not demonstrated in this study, it is plausible to suppose a latency period between the beginning of the experiment with drug use and the contact with the law: the real age of starting drug use could thus be even lower. This might be a stimulus to continue and to extend the prevention campaigns within secondary school or even to the last year of primary school. Although the extent of illicit drug use in young teenagers was surprising, the age category between 18 and 24 y remains the major risk group. They are more mobile than the younger drug users and they can easily provide themselves with illicit products; due to this higher level of mobility, however, they are more at risk of being booked by the police. This could explain their important contribution to the whole group of verbalised drug users. The problem remains that it is very difficult to reach this group for curative or preventative actions. Similar patterns of age distribution as in our study are published by the United Nations: of the people arrested for a drug affair in 1994 in Belgium, 10.5% were younger than 18 y, while 28% were between 18 and 20. Compared to 1993 they found a slight increase of the younger age group.⁶

The large contribution in our registration of foreigners from European Union countries can be explained by the Convention of Schengen which makes it possible to pass through some European borders without custom controls.

Although heroin was the second most popular drug from 1990–1995, its importance dramatically declined in 1996 and 1997. A similar pattern is seen for cocaine, but its contribution diminished less quickly. Moreover it is striking that cocaine was used more than heroin by the younger age groups. XTC seemed to be very popular in the age category from 16 to 24 y (the 'party age') and its importance kept growing: in 1996 it became the second most used drug. In 1997, it scored much less. The results of the 1998 registration will indicate whether XTC is on the way back. A drug with growing importance is amphetamines, of which the use increases with age. The relative importance of XTC and amphetamines raises again the question of the influence of the megadisco and rave party culture. Although the proportion of the use of LSD remained more or less stable, its relative importance never was high. Nevertheless it is worth mentioning that it was more frequently used by minors, whereas it was not popular at all in the eldest age category.

It should be pointed out that the verbalised drug user will only admit the illicit product use he cannot deny. This means that the results of our study probably underestimate the real drug use in this booked population. This is confirmed in a recent study in the USA⁷ which showed that

especially 'hard drugs' were underreported, while arrestees were less reluctant to admit the use of cannabis.

The results regarding the influence of gender on product use were inconsistent. Data of 1995 suggested that women used relatively more 'hard drugs' like cocaine and heroin. Analyses of 1996 and 1997 on the other hand, revealed that women preferred the 'disco drugs' XTC and amphetamines.

Polydrug use decreased from 21.5% in 1990 to 14% in 1997. As it is advantageous for the verbalised drug user to admit the use of as few products as possible, these data probably underestimate the real proportion of polydrug use. Comparing the age categories, the number of combined drugs was correlated with age. In the group younger than 16 y nobody used more than 3 different products. These data suggest that long-term use of drugs could lead to a certain adaptation and consequently to the combination of more illicit products. Nevertheless, very young drug users also combined 2 or 3 different products, which might disprove the former 'stepping-stone' theory. It is noteworthy that cannabis in particular was often combined with another product, probably because it is easy to get and rather cheap compared to other drugs.

The use of illicit products varied between the different participating District Courts, which could be explained by a different supply in the region, eg by a different geographic distribution of dances or the neighbourhood of the border. Furthermore, the distribution of the different illicit products changed during the years, probably because of an evolution in supply. These data could provide interesting additional information about drug traffic.

Pros of the drug users registration system by means of judicial data

- *Information on a 'difficult subject' becomes available.* Naturally, it is difficult to gather information on illicit drug use. The registration system by means of judicial data of the Flemish and the Brussels District Courts makes it possible to gather a lot of information on this issue.
- *Thanks to the registration system described above, information which would otherwise remain unused can be exploited.*
- *The drug users' registration system by means of judicial data is simple and cheap.* Since the data are already available, no new structure has to be set up. The main difficulty for the District Courts is to extract the desired data from their files and to get them on to the standardized forms. Although only basic data are asked for and the form is limited to one page, this is a considerable job if many hundreds of files must be processed. Most of the time this job was done voluntarily by civil servants of the District Courts. Until now, this did not lead to major difficulties. Nevertheless, one District Court left the registration system because of a lack of personnel.

This problem could be solved by delivering the data electronically. Since the 1997 registration, all District Courts are asked to do so. Until now, however, only the Brussels District Court is able to send us a disk. It is to be expected that the number of District Courts which can deliver the data electronically will increase in the future.

- *The registration is 'complete'.* Since the District Courts have all data of verbalised drug users, the registration should be complete, that is to say, all drug users who came into contact with the law because of their drug use during the registration period should be registered.
- *Large numbers.* Because (nearly) all District Courts participate, it is possible to gather data on a large amount of drug users. This is an advantage when statistical analysis is to be done.
- *A long-term study is possible.* The registration system has been running since 1990. This means that the study is carried out for the tenth time in 1999. All throughout the 1990s, we will have data on illicit drug users who came into contact with the law in Flanders and Brussels. Unlike most other studies on this theme, which only create pictures at a given moment in time, this allows us to describe possible trends and evolutions.

Cons of the drug users' registration system by means of judicial data

- *The registration system is limited to a specific kind of drug user.* The above-mentioned registration system only allows us to retrieve drug users who came into contact with the law. Although an interesting group to study, there are other important groups of drug users. It will not be possible to get an overview of 'the' drug problem with this kind of registration. For instance, as the questionnaires only dealt with booked drug users, one cannot conclude that the number of illicit product users is augmented yearly. The increase of forms could also be due to a more accurate registration or to a more efficient detection of drug use. However, independent data from the United Nations also showed that there was an increase in the number of people involved in drug affairs in Belgium from 7051 in 1990 to 18376 in 1995*.⁶
- *The registration system is interwoven with the motivation of police departments.* It will be clear that police departments which make a top priority of illicit drug use, will try harder to look for illicit drug users than will police departments where illicit drug use is not such a priority. In this respect, the registration system, as

*As these data contain drug users, drug dealers and (international) drug traders, they are not totally comparable with the data of the current study. The increase in the number of persons involved in drug affairs could be due to an increase in the amount of drug affairs, to increased activity of the police or to an extension of international drug traffic across Belgium.

described above, could be seen as the representation of police activities rather than of illicit drug use. However, to correct for this possible bias, raids on dances or bars are not taken into account and police are asked if special activities had taken place during the registration period. Moreover, thanks to the long-term setup of the study, this bias will be compensated for.

- *The registration system is interwoven with legislation.* Users of legal drugs such as alcohol or tobacco are impossible to register by means of our registration system. Otherwise, some illicit drug users will be registered who would not be registered as illicit drug users in another country. Cannabis, for instance, is not booked in The Netherlands when people only possess a small amount for their own use. Although prosecution of cannabis use in Belgium was given the lowest priority, it still must be registered in a *procès-verbal*.
- *There is no control over the extraction of the data and filling in of the forms.* Since the extraction of the data and the filling in of the forms is done by personnel of the District Courts, there is little or no external control over the correctness of the data. However, considerations about privacy make it not even desirable for an outsider to gather these data. Moreover, we have no single reason to think that the data extraction and filling in of the forms would be manipulated by District Court personnel.
- *The completeness and accuracy of the registration is depending on the willingness of the civil servants filling in the forms.* There could be an underregistration of data due to a lack of interest in the registration system or practical problems with the District Court personnel responsible for filling in the forms. This seemed to be especially the case for the District Court of Brussels due to the existence of a bilingual system (Dutch and French). Mainly due to practical problems, the Brussels registration data were not that complete. However, since 1996, this problem is solved because Brussels is now delivering the data electronically.

Conclusion

The registration system by means of judicial data shows that the District Courts have a great deal of information

available which can make an important additional contribution to future policy in terms of prevention campaigns and police investigations. However, the only way to get an overview of 'the' drug use is by combining all the different sources of information into a comprehensive surveillance system. The registration system described above is a good start for such an integrated registration, which actually is implemented in a pilot phase in Antwerp through the City Drugs Platform.

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